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C O N F I D E N T I A L ROME 000276

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TAGS: [PGOV IT ITALY NATIONAL ELECTIONS](#)

SUBJECT: ITALIAN ELECTIONS: PRODI LEADING THE RACE,  
BERLUSCONI SETTING THE PACE

REF: A. ROME 0239

1B. 05 ROME 3996

11. (C) SUMMARY: Recent polls show that PM Silvio Berlusconi's center-right (CR) coalition has gained on Romano Prodi's center-left (CL) coalition. Prodi's lead has slipped from 8 percentage points last summer to 4.5 percentage points in January. In the last month, Berlusconi has set the tone of the campaign. Instead of focusing on the economy or Italy's involvement in Iraq, areas where Berlusconi might be politically weak, the public debate has centered on Berlusconi's ubiquitous media presence, the Unipol-Democrats of the Left financial imbroglio and the date for dissolving parliament. Berlusconi's recent surge and his ability to control the debate has most experts saying Italy's April 9 national election remains too close to call; we agree. END SUMMARY.

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CENTER-LEFT AHEAD IN THE POLLS  
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12. (C) A poll conducted January 25-16 shows the center-left coalition led by Romano Prodi leading PM Silvio Berlusconi's center-right coalition by 51.5 percent to 47.0 percent. An early January poll gave the CL 52.1 percent and the CR 45.9 percent. For Berlusconi, the most recent poll is an improvement since last summer when he trailed by 8 percentage points. Berlusconi recently has claimed publicly that the center-right has surpassed the center-left in polls commissioned by Forza Italia. Italy's prominent pollsters all agree that is not possible. Forza Italia's coordinator for Lazio admitted to Poloff that the center-left maintains the lead but claimed that Berlusconi's campaign talents and the center-left's internal troubles mean the race is not over.

13. (U) A national poll conducted January 25-26 asked the question, "If national elections were held tomorrow, for which party would you vote?" and produced the following results: Forza Italia (20.5), National Alliance (12.5), Union of Christian Democrats of the Center (6.0), Northern League (4.0), Other CR parties (4), Democrats of the Left (23), Daisy (9.5), Communist Renewal (8.5), Green (2), Di Pietro List (2) combined Radicals and Italian Socialists (1.5), Other CL (5).

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BERLUSCONI SETS THE PACE  
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14. (U) Despite trailing in the polls, having led Italy into a military conflict in Iraq unpopular in Italy and having been Prime Minister during a four-year period of anemic economic growth, Berlusconi has managed to set the campaign debate. After regional elections in April 2006, conventional wisdom was that the center-left was destined to ride to victory in national elections based on a wave of discontent with the war in Iraq and poor economic performance. Those two issues have been almost entirely absent from the political debate since the electoral campaign recommenced after the Christmas holidays.

15. (C) Berlusconi set the tone in January when leaked wiretaps connected Democrats of the Left (DS) Party Secretary Piero Fassino to the disgraced former head of Unipol Bank. Berlusconi implied on national television that DS leaders had significant involvement in the corruption scandal and even made a very public visit to prosecuting magistrates in which he presented information on DS Secretary Fassino/ DS President D'Alema meetings with Unipol officials. Even if those allegations proved irrelevant to the investigation, news of a DS-Unipol banking scandal dominated the press for weeks and spurred a strong internal debate within the DS. The DS left-wing is strongly opposed to any affiliation with traditional financial interests and the episode has weakened the reformists Fassino and D'Alema. Ominously, a prominent Forza Italia official warned Poloff that the Unipol scandal would strengthen the radical-left (read Communist Renewal Party) at the expense of the DS.

16. (U) Since January, Berlusconi has appeared on nearly every

political talk show in Italy while Prodi has been all but absent. Other center-left party leaders have faced-off against Berlusconi, but the issues have been less important than the fact that Berlusconi's media presence has been ubiquitous. In fact, Berlusconi's media blitz has been the most debated political topic for the past two weeks.

17. (SBU) The other prominent political issue has been the

conflict between Berlusconi and President Ciampi regarding the date for the dissolution of parliament. Berlusconi risked an institutional conflict with the Presidency but won a postponement of the date from January 29 to February 11. According to Berlusconi, this postpones the date in which campaign period restrictions on media take effect. Ciampi's disagreement with this claim is the new headline. Besides allowing Berlusconi to maintain his high profile, his coalition has used the extra time to pass legislation permitting the use of lethal force in self-defense (popular with the Northern League) and to move forward legislation reforming the criminalization of narcotics usage/distribution. The new date for the dissolution of parliament corresponds with the opening of the Winter Olympics in Italy, which will certainly distract press attention for a few days.

18. (C) Berlusconi has all but removed Iraq from the debate. As reported A, Minister of Defense Martino's announcement of a withdrawal of Italian troops from Iraq by the end of 2006 is similar to the center-left's position, even if we understand Berlusconi's policy to be slightly more nuanced. A DS Official called Poloff the day after Martino's announcement asking in total disbelief if the U.S. knew in advance that Martino would make the announcement. When Poloff said the opposition should be pleased to see Italian troops coming home, he remarked that the timing of the announcement was certainly not meant to please center-left parties.

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CENTER LEFT IN DISARRAY  
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19. (C) Berlusconi's maneuverings have disoriented the famously fractioned center-left coalition (B). One Daisy Party official confided to Poloff that the entire center-left was depressed and just waiting to see what Berlusconi's next move will be. Confirming this, a Daisy member of parliament told Naples Pol/Econ Officer that he was not optimistic about a center-left victory due the lingering effects of the Unipol and other scandals. Union of Democrats for Europe, a small party currently aligned with Prodi, President Clemente Mastella is talking publicly of a future split inside the DS and hedging for a possible shift to the center-right. Meanwhile, Prodi has been all but absent from the political scene.

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COMMENT  
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110. (C) COMMENT: Berlusconi's dominance of the campaign debate has lifted the spirits of his supporters and disoriented the opposition. National elections are just 10 weeks away and despite the center-left's continued lead, the race remains too close to call. END COMMENT.  
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